

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6237
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CAMPAIGN '78: BLACK ELECTION PROSPECTS

ANNCR:

IT'S BEEN 13 YEARS SINCE THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT BECAME LAW AND THE LAST VESTIGES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION WERE STRIPPED FROM THE AMERICAN VOTING BOOTH. SINCE THAT TIME, BLACK INFLUENCE ON U.S. POLITICS HAS SHARPLY INCREASED, ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER OF BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS -- WHILE UP DRAMATICALLY -- SEEMS TO BE LEVELING OFF. VOA'S CHARLES MEDD HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT ON BLACK ELECTION PROSPECTS.

VOICE:

MORE THAN 4,500 BLACK AMERICANS CURRENTLY HOLD ELECTIVE OFFICE -- A THREE-FOLD INCREASE SINCE 1970 WHEN SUCH STATISTICS WERE FIRST COLLECTED. THOSE FIGURES SOUND IMPRESSIVE UNTIL IT'S NOTED THAT THEY REPRESENT LESS THAN ONE PER CENT OF ALL THE ELECTIVE OFFICES IN THIS COUNTRY, FROM THE NATIONAL TO THE LOCAL LEVEL. MOREOVER, THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF BLACKS WHO HAVE SUCCEEDED IN POLITICS HAVE DONE SO AT THE LOCAL LEVEL WHERE BLACK VOTERS ARE HIGHLY CONCENTRATED. SUCH VOTER CONCENTRATIONS HAVE BEEN FACTORS IN RECENT URBAN ELECTIONS WHICH HAVE PRODUCED BLACK MAYORS IN DOZENS OF CITIES, INCLUDING THE INCUMBENT MAYORS OF LOS ANGELES AND DETROIT, TWO OF THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST, AND IN WASHINGTON, D.C. THE NATION'S CAPITAL.

DESPITE THEIR SUCCESS AT THE CITY LEVEL, ONLY A HANDFUL OF BLACKS HAVE WON STATE-WIDE ELECTIONS, AND ONE WHO HAS -- SENATOR EDWARD BROOKE OF MASSACHUSETTS -- IS INVOLVED IN ONE OF THIS YEAR'S MOST CLOSELY-WATCHED CONTESTS. BROOKE, A REPUBLICAN, IS THE ONLY BLACK MEMBER OF THE U.S. SENATE,

AND HIS CHANCES FOR A THIRD SIX-YEAR TERM HAVE BEEN JEOPARDIZED BY A COMBINATION OF PERSONAL PROBLEMS, INCLUDING A WELL-PUBLICIZED DIVORCE, AND A STRONG CHALLENGE FROM AN ATTRACTIVE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT. ANOTHER BLACK SENATORIAL CANDIDATE IS CHARLES EVERS OF MISSISSIPPI, A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN AND SMALL-TOWN MAYOR. WITH STRONG BLACK SUPPORT, THE INDEPENDENT EVERS IS GIVEN AN OUTSIDE CHANCE OF WINNING A THREE-WAY CONTEST.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, BLACKS ARE EXPECTED TO RETAIN THE 16 SEATS THEY NOW OCCUPY. THIS INCLUDES FOUR RECENTLY VACATED SEATS THAT NEW BLACK CANDIDATES ARE FAVORED TO WIN.

ONE OF THE FOUR BLACKS WHO IS LEAVING IS CONGRESSWOMAN YVONNE BURKE OF CALIFORNIA. SHE RESIGNED TO RUN FOR STATE ATTORNEY GENERAL, CALIFORNIA'S HIGHEST LEGAL OFFICE. TWO OTHER BLACK CALIFORNIANS ARE RUNNING FOR RE-ELECTION TO STATE OFFICES (LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR MERVIN DYMALLY AND SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION WILSON RILES). AND, ACROSS THE COUNTRY, A TOTAL OF THIRTEEN BLACKS ARE SEEKING STATE-WIDE POSITIONS.

WHEN ALL THE VOTES ARE COUNTED NEXT TUESDAY, BLACK POLITICIANS ARE NOT EXPECTED TO ADD SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE 4,500 SEATS THEY NOW HOLD ACROSS THE COUNTRY. BUT THOSE NUMBERS DO NOT REFLECT THE EVOLVING STRENGTH OF AMERICA'S BLACK ELECTORATE. THE BLACK VOTE IS NO LONGER IGNORED, EVEN IN THE SOUTH WHERE NOT LONG AGO WHITE POLITICAL POWER DEPENDED ON OVERT APPEALS TO RACISM. TODAY, SOUTHERN WHITE CANDIDATES ARE FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF SOUTH CAROLINA SENATOR STROM THURMOND. THIRTY YEARS AGO SENATOR THURMOND LED A SOUTHERN DELEGATION OUT OF THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION RATHER THAN ACCEPT THE PARTY'S LIBERAL POSITION ON CIVIL RIGHTS.

THIS YEAR, HE'S COURTING EVERY BLACK VOTE HE CAN FIND TO ENSURE
ANOTHER TERM IN WASHINGTON.

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